

# Network not only answer to sharing

When it comes to sharing computer printers and other peripherals, the most common solution — a network — isn't the only answer. A snazzy, less-expensive alternative is a device called The Logical Connection from Fifth Generation Systems.

The Logical Connection, at \$495, provides a common way of connecting computers, printers and modems. And, even though some devices use a data-linking standard called "parallel" and others another standard called "serial," you don't have to even know the difference when you use The Logical Connection. The device offers connections to either and does whatever translations are necessary.

In testing the device, I found that it worked as advertised, except in a surprisingly common application.

The Logical Connection is about the size of a necktie gift box and has a combination of eight plugs for accepting serial and parallel cables. Just how you mix and match cables and devices depends



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on a number of factors: types of available ports (parallel or serial), distance between connections (serial can be a much longer distance), and type of device (modems are always serial).

Here are some things to consider before you buy:

- It's best when you have, for example, three computers in separate offices sharing a single laser printer. Because serial cables allow much longer runs than parallel, the computers would link to The Logical Connection from their serial ports, while the laser printer might use its parallel port.

- It stores incoming data in its own memory if the printer happens to be busy. In the above example, if all three computers sent print jobs at about the same time, the

first to arrive would have the printer to itself until its job was finished, then the others would, in the order received, get their jobs printed. The Logical Connection comes with either 256K of onboard memory or 512K for \$100 extra.

- It handles complicated configurations too. With four serial and four parallel ports, there's a wealth of possibilities for peripheral sharing. Setups might include three computers sharing two printers and a modem, or two computers sharing four different types of printers.

On the downside, setting it up can be a little daunting, and best left for experts. You first have to run a detailed setup program. And if, at first, your configuration doesn't work, it's probably because you didn't read the complicated manual and you missed one of the many setup menus.

In addition, my initial testing of the device unearthed a serious problem. Files directed to the printer from different computers tended to interrupt each other. Af-

ter investing hours of time searching for a solution, the Fifth Generation technical staff directed us to rewrite our test program and change the defaults in the device.

- The bottom line: The Logical Connection provides an easy method for sharing computer peripherals. It does more than routing signals, however. By translating between serial and parallel it allows optimum juggling of available ports, cables, and distance requirements. And the built-in memory provides print spooling. But the setup is complex, and it might take you a bit longer than you anticipate to get up and running. It's available from Fifth Generation Systems, 11200 Industriplex Blvd., Baton Rouge, La. 70809, Telephone (800) 873-4384.

*Hillel Segal's column includes evaluations of gadgets, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity. Segal is a management consultant based in Boulder.*